



## ‘Incoherent’: Democrats, Advocates Baffled By Biden Argument On Refugees

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Historically, the U.S. has been able to work with various political situations, backlogs and surges from vulnerable populations without an issue.

President Joe Biden will make a final decision next month on how many refugees to admit into the country this year, the White House said late Friday, after hours of criticism from fellow Democrats and refugee resettlement groups who were furious with his decision to keep in place a historically low number set by his anti-refugee predecessor.

Their anger and surprise was matched only by their bafflement at the administration’s reasoning for the decisions, which linked refugee intake with an ongoing crisis on the border between the U.S. and Mexico, a connection many advocates and allies said made little sense and had more to do with politics than policy.

The Biden administration said Friday that the president walked back the decision because the damage former President Donald Trump did to the refugee system was far more extensive than they thought, and the wing of the Department of Health and Human Services charged with resettling refugees was overwhelmed with its responsibilities handling a surge of unaccompanied minors at the border.

But on Friday afternoon, following heavy criticism from leading Democrats in both chambers of Congress, the administration suggested it would later increase the cap from Trump’s record low of 15,000. In a statement, White House press secretary Jen Psaki admitted there was “confusion” over the president’s decision and said the president would “set a final, increased refugee cap for the remainder of this fiscal year by May 15.”

“Given the decimated refugee admissions program we inherited, and burdens on the Office of Refugee Resettlement, his initial goal of 62,500 seems unlikely,” Psaki said in a statement. “While finalizing that determination, the President was urged to take immediate action to reverse the Trump policy that banned refugees from many key regions, to enable flights from those regions to begin within days; today’s order did that.”

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But the decision to leave Trump's cap in place for the time being was disturbing to refugee resettlement groups, activists and Democrats. They quickly refuted White House reasoning for the decision, saying the refugee settlement agencies aren't hindered by other backlogs, including the surge of asylum-seekers at the border. While the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Department of Health and Human Services is partially responsible for both groups, migrants at the border seeking asylum are processed in an entirely separate system than refugees fleeing persecution overseas.

"It is immoral to pit vulnerable populations against one another, particularly in light of the fact that we have the capacity to do all of these things," said Meredith Own, the director of policy and advocacy at Church World Services, one of the nine major resettlement agencies.

In a statement, Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) called the decision to keep the refugee cap low "cruel" and "no more acceptable now than it was during the Trump Administration."

"The asylum process at the southern border and the refugee process are completely separate immigration systems," he continued. "Conflating the two constitutes caving to the politics of fear."

Part of HHS, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) works with a wide array of vulnerable populations including refugees, asylum-seekers and trafficking and torture victims. In fact, ORR exhausted its \$1.3 billion budget allocated for this fiscal year and has dipped into a budget meant for resettlement agencies to continue paying for more beds for unaccompanied minors.

Historically, the U.S. has been able to work with the various political situations, backlogs and surges from each of those vulnerable populations without an issue, said Owens.

"The United States certainly has the investments and the capacity, and our communities have the will to do all of these things," she added.

Melanie Nezer, senior vice president for public affairs at HIAS, an international Jewish organization that resettles and provides services to refugees, agreed and noted her agency had prepared for the higher cap since Biden's presidential campaign.

When Biden became president, refugee resettlement organizations and refugees across the world were optimistic, particularly when he pledged in February to raise the cap to 62,500 refugees for this fiscal year and 125,000 for the next year. Despite the severe cuts made by Trump, refugee resettlement agencies began to prepare for more refugees, anticipating increased resources promised by the new president.

The situation on the U.S.-Mexico border, which has seen an unprecedented surge in families and unaccompanied minors, has become a clear political problem for the administration. Republicans have focused much of their rhetorical firepower on the administration's handling of the situation, and public surveys indicate even many voters who approve of Biden's overall job performance have a negative view of his handling of the border.

That's left refugee advocates wondering if the vague nexus between two largely unrelated immigration issues has made more refugees' admittances a political sacrificial lamb.

“I think it’s an excuse to take advantage of the political moment,” said David Bier, a research fellow on immigration studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. “This idea that this wealthy nation does not have the private resources to resettle people is just ridiculous.”

CHANDAN KHANNA VIA GETTY IMAGESA migrant boy from Central America waits with her mother for a bus after they are dropped off by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection at a bus station near the Gateway International Bridge, between the cities of Brownsville, Texas, and Matamoros, Mexico, on March 15 in Brownsville, Texas.

Even some Republicans have acknowledged the two issues have relatively little in common.

“The refugee program is much more of an orderly and legal process that is entirely distinct,” Ohio Sen. Rob Portman told The Washington Post earlier this week. “I would increase the refugee’s cap from where it was in the Trump years, and I would make the asylum system work as it should.”

Refugee organizations were already frustrated with the Biden administration’s slow-walking on implementing policy changes. Nearly two months after announcing his intention to Congress, the president still hasn’t formally signed the presidential determination that would raise the refugee cap, a delay that upended hundreds of lives. Refugee resettlement agencies were left dealing with the aftermath of canceled flights and expiring health and security clearances without any answers from the White House.

“It’s so disappointing because we thought we would have this partner ... there was an expectation based on that announcement that there would be a change,” said Nezer.

“There is a resettlement infrastructure in place. We have held on for four long years, as the prior administration really thought to break the program, but it did not. We are still here and we are ready,” she added.

White House officials emphasized the possibility of working with Congress to lift the cap later in this fiscal year — which ends on Sept. 30 — and said the administration remained on track to admit 125,000 refugees in the fiscal year 2022.

“This is just the beginning,” Psaki wrote on Twitter earlier on Friday. “This step lifts the restrictions put in place by prior Administration on where refugees can come from. We need to rebuild the resettlement program and we are committed to continuing to increase refugee numbers.”

But advocates said such an increase would be difficult without increasing the program’s capacity now.

“There’s no way that’s going to happen unless they’re going to increase the cap this year,” Bier said. “It’s the most incoherent explanation they could give. If you’re not going to increase admissions, then you’re not rebuilding the program.”